



**DIVERSITY AND DISABILITY IN VISUAL ARTS,
CHILDREN'S LITERATURE, PLAY AND CREATIVE WRITING:
AN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN IN EARLY
CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN A NON-FORMAL
EDUCATIONAL SETTING**

**Vassiliki Pliogou¹,
Sotiris Gakos²,
Niki Dedousi³**

¹Dr. in Science Education, AUTH,
President of OMEP Thessaloniki,
Academic Coordinator at the School of Education,
Metropolitan College of Thessaloniki,
14, Venizelou str. 54624,
Thessaloniki, Greece

²PhD c. in Philology, AUTH, Lecturer,
School of Education,
Metropolitan College of Thessaloniki,
Thessaloniki, Greece

³Psychologist – Lecturer, School of Education,
Metropolitan College of Thessaloniki,
Thessaloniki, Greece

Abstract:

This article presents an applied educational program for early years children with three thematic objectives, i.e. empathy, disabilities and visual arts. The program took place in Children's Museum of Thessaloniki and focused on the reflection between the text and image generally. The participants were twenty children from 4 – 8 years old, as the program was designed for early childhood education students. The program was theoretically based on the principals of Social Pedagogy, the methods and the techniques which were considered appropriate, were related to experiential activities, use of artworks and creative writing. The artworks that were used in the program originate from Greek visual arts of the 19th and 20th century and depict images of disability. The use of literary narration and visual arts especially in early childhood education constitutes an alternative, interactive and effective tool in order to teach issues that are related to social phenomena, to impart the value of respect in diversity and to reinforce the value of inclusion. Teachers can help students develop an understanding of social and cultural meaning in art, and can provide students with the

¹ Correspondence: email pliogouv@gmail.com

tools to understand their culture, by recognizing art as a cultural carrier, using a critical literacy framework. In this program, children had the chance to create their stories and to talk about diversity, to discover their senses and to express their feelings playing and learning by experience.

Keywords: early childhood education, non-formal education, social pedagogy, creative writing, visual arts, diversity, disabilities

1. Introduction

During the last decades, the new trends concerning the educational process have shifted towards a more social and less cognitive-centered educational nature. This need for change of focus has emerged from the historical and social development that took place in Europe during the 19th and the 20th century, as well as the creation of an institutional framework that would foster the principles of freedom, dignity and respect to human beings (Stavenhagen, 2008). These values were expressed after the conception of a new scientific field, the field of Social Pedagogy, which was formed under the ideas deriving from the Enlightenment, the transformation of European cities in urban centers and in the wake of the two World Wars (Mylonakou-Keke, 2003). The new approach on the educational process, as it was delineated from the perspective of Social Pedagogy, should help children comprehend the complexities of the social phenomena, respect diversity, recognize the value of rights and understand that people are entitled and fight for a better life (Pliogou, Karakatsani, 2017).

The main idea of human rights is expressed through the value of respect of every form of diversity, represented in any difference and similarity that define a person as unique (Wellner, 2000). One form of diversity that can be easily detected is the one that is visible, such as the different body color or the physical disability. World Health Organization (WHO) also proposed the term "visible diversity" in order to describe these categories of differences that can be seen and prevent social inclusion (Alkistis, 2008, cited in Pavlou et al., 2012, p. 9). For this reason, it is crucial to raise awareness of diversity and disability issues from an early age, so as children become adults that can build a world where differences are welcomed. This purpose can be detected in the main principle of Social Pedagogy and in the value that promotes in the education field.

Applying these principles in the educational process, we can discover changes in the content as well as in the methods of teaching. One of them was the introduction of human rights education as a constituent part of the education provided to a civil society which is founded on the principles of equality over gender and race, empathy and acceptance of diversity, freedom and world peace (Pliogou, 2011). Regarding the procedures and methods used in the educational process, it is apparent that the traditional methods are incapable of responding to this new role that education is expected to play. For this reason, new ways that emphasize in experience involvement, evolvment of curiosity, initiative and eagerness to learn (Kokkos, 2005).

These new ways make the use of new means, which will contribute in building new principles and values, an impending need. Arts, games and literature constitute some of those tools that can be used by the teacher and create a multidimensional educational environment which concurrently uses an intermodal concept in class (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2010). At the same time, learning is actualized with a combination of both formal learning spaces, such as classrooms, and non-formal, such as cultural venues and environment that directly reflect the social reality (Dicović & Plavšić, 2015). Therefore, it is evident that this educational culture sees the child as wholeness and as a part of civil society.

2. Literature review

Accepting diversity is an issue that concerns more than ever nowadays societies that are consisted of people with differences in origins, religions, culture etc. One form of diversity is disability, including physical, mental or any other condition that limits a person's everyday life. Disability has moved through the years from medical to social context. There are many researchers who claim that disability is more related to a social construction that reflects the way society treats people with disability (Oliver & Barnes, 1998 ; Watson, 2004). Taking into consideration this idea, people can contribute in social context change and transformation into a context that can include and accept every person's differences. The need of promoting a receptive perspective to diversity and the necessity of helping children familiarize themselves with people with disabilities emerge along with the idea of inclusion. These ideas can be originally expressed by the principals of Social Pedagogy, a field that promotes a different way to approach education, through authentication, creativity and empowerment (Cameron & Moss, 2011).

Social Pedagogy is a scientific field which is based on humanitarian values and focuses on the connection between education and the social framework (Pliogou & Karakatsani, 2017). At the same time, it attempts to associate formal with non-formal education, to highlight the social aspects of education and to fulfill the social and cultural needs that arise in our times (Mylonakou-Keke, 2016). The focus areas are various and they are related to the child, the youth, the rights of the child, the deviant behavior, the social and family care and other issues that bring out the relation between Pedagogy and other scientific fields, such as Sociology and Psychology.

The focal point of Social Pedagogy in the social reality is directly connected with the principles of scientists that originate from Pedagogy field, such as John Dewey, as well as from Psychology field such as Leon Vygotsky (Glassman, 2001). According to Dewey, experience plays a vital role in the educational process since it gives the child the opportunity to observe the circumstances, correlate them and conclude in results that derive from the experience itself and are applicable in others too. Furthermore, he defines learning as a process of abstracting a meaning from the experience, which rises from the process of critical reflection (Kokkos, 2005). Vygotsky, who is another theorist

that pointed out the significance of the social framework in learning, supported the view that learning is developing with the transference of common meanings in a sociocultural framework, a process that occurs through more knowledgeable others, people who have advanced knowledge and help the child learn, transmitting parts of culture (Mishra, 2013).

Social framework and culture entering in education require the use of alternative means, which cultivate the feeling that people are a part of society and interact with their environment. Perkins (1994) underlined the significance of works of art in the awakening of multiple symbolic systems and the propulsion of the child's sensory systems synchronization during learning. Simultaneously, the child becomes a member of cultural, historical and social information, since the works of art display the reality at that time and delimit space and time of each culture (Maraveli, Svirou & Pliogou, 2014). Children are not only spectators of images but they also transform in researchers, they develop a critical stance towards images and they find evaluation and selection criteria for images (Grosdos, 2017). Moreover, they use visual tools and they evolve into creators of images. The subtractive way in which works of art depict the images lays the ground for further expression of ideas and imagination, hence, generate new meanings and consciences of the different audiences (Dalkavoukis, 2012). To that end, the educational process is turning into an activity which intends the moral and social conformation of the child with the utilization of works of art (Chatzidimou, 2010).

The use of experiential game, which aims at the participation of children in a group experience concerning social phenomena, can play the same role as the art in education. The concept of game has been the field of research of many different scientific approaches. Human can be released from suppressive, deterministic bonds through the fantasy and the charm of it. During the reading of a literary text, an illusion is grown, a submersion to the imaginary time and space that lasts as long as the activities that frame it. Just as in a game. When literary readings are followed by an exercise of creative writing or an interactive game, the child is inducted in a process which gradually makes it more mature and adequate reader (Kotopoulos, Zografou, Vakali, 2014).

The narration of fairy tales in early childhood changes the way that children experience the stories, since narration clearly becomes a social procedure. Children can get inspired and play together in a collective and cooperative effort and, progressively, build the theme and the literary patterns of the stories or fairy tales. At the same time, they can grasp elements of the narrative structure. Appleyard (1991) also perceives game as so important for the readers of pre-school age that he uses the term "readers-players". The little readers - listeners of the stories are called upon to participate and creatively interact with the stories either by unravelling them or making their own.

The use of literature, especially in the pre-school education, is broadened with the good use of images. Speech and image compose a creative piece of educational use and educational practice. In this framework, children commune with the famous creators, painters, illustrators and writers. Image combined with text constitute means

and material for designing, organising and actualising a series of educational activities. In this way, the term of "multiliteracy" arises and indicates the variety of communication forms, as well as the variety of text forms that are produced in a multilingual and multicultural society. Multiliteracies are not just the coordination of literacy skills but it is about a part of cohesive set with different combinations of communication means, knowledge and skills. Multimodality is formulated around the dipole of content and expression, while content is divided in the two levels of discourse and design and expression is divided in production and distribution (Grosdos, 2017).

Teaching using interactive methods that aim in the involvement of children in the sociocultural framework, is more efficient with the participation of significant others in the procedures. These important others, especially in the early childhood education, are predominantly represented by the parents and the teachers, and secondarily by the friends. It has been proven by research that the participation of parents in the educational game is particularly significant for the social and cognitive development of the child (Mylonakou-Keke, 2009). It is indeed a kind of parental participation or cooperation, a term that is used to describe a broad spectrum of parent behaviors and practices both at home and at an educational context. The goal of these behaviors is to reinforce the process of learning (Sakellariou, 2009). Bearing in mind the approach of the eco-systemic model of Urie Bronfenbrenner, according to which the child is the center around which systems are extended in a micro and macro level, the collaboration between the system of the parents and the system of the school is self-evident (Craig & Baucum, 2002).

3. Methodology/Structure of the program

The program called "*Stories being told by images...*" took place in Children Museum of Thessaloniki. The place was chosen because it represents a non-typical educational context that hosts programs addressed to early childhood education students and simultaneously promotes cultural activities. The aim of the program was the children's familiarization with diversity through three activities that included the use of literature and experiential games.

Phase 1

In creative writing exercises, as the one that follows, it is important to utilize and provide a variety of stimulus, before any kind of other act regarding words and speech. The emotional identification of the child and the level of participation in this activity - a stimulus that depends on its credibility, playful character, the subject and the interest of the children. The activity is designed in a way that children will be able to express themselves through cooperating either individually or collectively, by posing questions, stating their views and describing situations. The following technique utilizes an already existing text of children's literature as well as its illustrations. Children are asked to answer specific questions relating to the main character, the obstacles that he is facing and his way of expressing (himself). Then, they will hang their answers to the

tree of the storyline and later, they will attempt to read the words and describe illustrations of the book, wearing the special glasses on.

The first activity based on the narration of Petros Poulakis's book, a fairytale titled "He" (in Greek "Aftos" – linguistic root of autism), by the coordinators of the program and the parents that participated in the program. The narration was followed by an interactive activity in which children had to answer coordinators questions, regarding the hero, the way the others see him, the problems that he deals with, the solution of these problems and to hang on "the narration tree" their answers concerning the narrative structure of storytelling. After completing the decoration of the "narration tree", children wore special glasses in order to understand the way hero, "Aftos", sees the world.



Title: "The narration tree"

Duration: 15 minutes

Aims:

- to sensitize children on issues of diversity
- to cultivate their empathy
- to help them identify the narrative structure

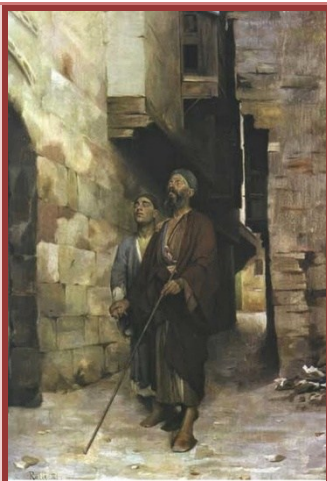
Children positively responded to the activity and showed their content by differently experiencing the subject of the text. The progress of the study over children's literature has showcased approach and interpretation methods of diversity in the context of literature (Kanatsouli, 2002). The narrative elements consist of an approach that helps feature the distance between the character or the narrator and the narrative facts, which helps the reader's identification.

The book refers to autism. The little turtle - the main character of the story is acting different than the others since it was born till finally understands why the behavior of the character is odd. The tortoiseshell of Him hides a secret of a different yet extraordinary and unique world that only if you look straight to the character's eyes you will understand that things are not so strange.

Phase 2

The second activity included three experiential games that were inspired by three paintings of Greek artists of 19th and 20th century. Every painting resulted in a different game, in which children and parents participated, after they tried to describe what they could see in the painting. Reading and interpreting images facilitates the construction of concepts that are more complex and the respective speech. Images contribute to the creation of an environment that simulates an artificial fact, a situation or a game that looks like a real fact. This environment works as a substitute construction of the indirect experience.

The first painting was Theodoros Rallis's *"Blind man, leads blind man"* (2nd half of the 19th Century) and was followed by the game *"The blind man and his/her helper"*. Children made pairs and every pair should have a child with eyes closed and a child that helps the "blind" one to walk a path full of obstacles. In the end of the path, the roles were changing and the helper was becoming the "blind man".



Theodoros Rallis (2nd half of the 19th Century) *"Blind Man leads blind man"*, Oil in canvas



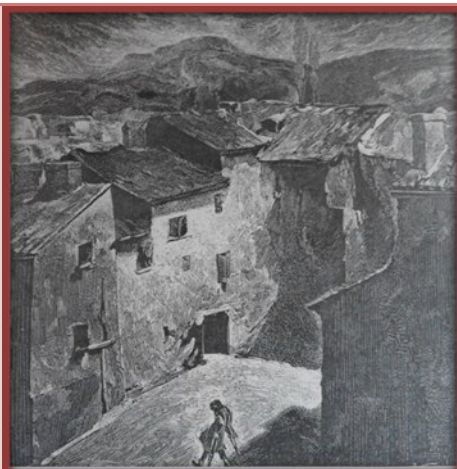
Title: *"The blind man and his/her helper"*

Duration: 7 minutes

Aims:

- to develop empathy
- to cooperate with each other
- to enhance their communication skills

The second painting was Alekos Kontopoulos's *"French Village"* (1944), was followed by the game *"In other people's shoes"*, and was a relay race with a shoe. The children created a line with big spaces between them and every child should approach the child next to him/her wearing a very big shoe that made the ride difficult. The last child was the only one that could see the painting and he/she should describe to others what he/she was seeing in order the rest of the children to draw the painting.



Alekos Kontopoulos (1944)
"French Village", carte à gratter



Title: *"In other people's shoes"*

Duration: 7 minutes

Aims:

- to experience with the topic of visual arts
- to cultivate critical observation and thinking

The third visual artwork was Yiannis Lasithiotakis's *"The beggar"* and was followed by a puzzle game regarding the painting and children should complete it in pairs. The one child was in front of the puzzle and had his hands behind his back so he/she couldn't use them. The other child was right behind, had his/her eyes covered and his/her hands replaced the hands of the first child. The first child that could see the parts of the puzzle should give directions to the other child that could use his hands so as to complete the image.



Yiannis Lasithiotakis (1977)
"The beggar", acrylic in canvas.



Title: *"The beggar"*

Duration: 7 minutes


Aims:

- to develop cooperation
- to improve communication skills

Phase 3

The language of music is not transferring the exact meaning that words can and thus, anyone can interpret it in their own way. This is one of the remarkable things about music, that everyone gets whatever he/she wishes and needs, according to their own spiritual and emotional needs. Furthermore, due to its non-linguistic nature, music can substitute verbal communication for those that have verbal, emotionally related disabilities. In Music, the contentment of success is of significant importance for the child and a very important element for the configuration of their character. Particularly, the participation in group musical activities can provide the child opportunities for socializing. The sense of sociability gives a lot of joy, especially to the children that are shy and those that are refusing to cooperate for some reasons (Sergi, 2000).

The last activity was called *"The silent orchestra"* and the children heard the sounds of the musical instruments that are a part of a classical orchestra and recognized their pictures and motions that the player needs to do in order to play these musical instruments. Children formed groups and each group was placed at the right place of the *"silent orchestra"* in order to represent a musical instrument. Afterward, the children played together - pantomime - according to the guidance of the coordinators.

	Title: <i>"The silent orchestra"</i>
	Duration: 15 minutes
Aims:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• to practice activities that are connected to lack of senses• to cooperate with each other• to follow directions	

4. Conclusion

An important part of applying a program is the reflection for the evaluation of program's results. This procedure is accomplished through re-examining the goals that had been set during the planning of the program and checking their fulfillment. In this specific program, this examination resulted from the observation of the activities, the works of art that have been served to the children and the reflection that was provided by the parents participating in the program.

Regarding the first activity, the construction of the narration tree with the selection of words that refer to the diversity of the story's main character, such as "weird" and "different", indicated the comprehension of the way that disability is socially portrayed. Moreover, children chose the basic elements of the story, such as the main character, the obstacles that he faced during the solution of the problem, time and space, with the help of moderators' questions and got familiar with the way that a story is narratively structured.

In relation with the second activity, the moderators chose to start with the search of images and visual elements of the artworks. This description aimed to familiarize children with parts of the artworks, such as shading, colors and faces that were depicted, which accompanied and composed the depiction of diversity and disability as well. In the first experiential game, *"the blind and his guide"* cooperation and empathy were developed, as the children had the chance to realize the difficulties that individuals with disabilities are facing, through game and experiential activity. At the same time, the value of mutual assistance was growing.

During the second experiential game, in which one of the children was asked to describe what he was seeing in the artwork, the goal of developing communication skills was accomplished. This fact was apparent from the correspondence between the children's paintings and the original one. The communication and cooperation skills were built up through the third experiential game, which required the interaction between children, the guidance and the execution of orders so as to complete the artwork. Additionally, children had the chance to accurately identify the objects that accompany the image of diversity and disability which were separated in puzzle pieces. Throughout this, the connection of disability with its social aspect was achieved.

Finally, in the third activity, children had the chance to develop both cognitive and socio-sentimental skills, since it was required to relate sounds with musical instruments but also cooperate so as to reconstruct and mime the silent band. It is apparent that each one of the activities has experiential spirit and was based on the theoretical approaches that put the experience of the children in the center of attention, as a key factor of the educational process and as a tool for the attainment of learning.

The reflection provided by parents that participated in the program was equally important with the information coming from the observation and evaluation of the program's efficiency. In detail, they noticed the importance of experiential activities, which played an important role in the familiarization of children and parents with issues concerning social phenomena. Furthermore, the critical reflection on the structure of the program led to the conclusion that it would be more useful if those three sub-activities that composed the second one, took place consecutively and not concurrently. In this way, there will be a gradual transition from one to the other. They also underlined how useful the inclusion of those of alternative means of education in the classroom could be.

The program's significance lies on the fact that approaches the issue of diversity and disability using alternative methods such as literature, art and experiential activities that are also sectors of social and cultural elements. Moreover, it took place in a cultural place as it is important that teaching about social phenomena should be related to social and cultural context. These alternative means create a multidimensional educational environment that promotes diversity acceptance and inclusion of all differences in practice.

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